

AVESTA: FROM MONOTHEISM TO POLYTHEISM

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the analysis of the Avestan texts, which are the primary source of Zoroastrianism. The study compares the Old Avestan texts with the Young Avestan texts. The religious views in the Old Avestan (Gathic) texts are analyzed, showing how the monotheistic principle present in these texts gradually transformed into the polytheistic elements found in the Young Avestan texts over time. The strengthening of polytheistic elements is highlighted. Although Ahura Mazda is depicted as the central deity, the influence of Mithraism, the worship of specific attributes, and other forms of belief on Zoroastrianism are discussed. Additionally, the social, political, and cultural causes behind this process are also considered. This article contributes to understanding the historical development of the Avesta.

Keywords: Zoroaster, Zoroastrianism, Mazda Yasna, Gathas, emanation, attribute, Manichaeism, Christianity, Vedas.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье проводится анализ авестийских текстов, которые являются основным источником зороастризма. Исследование сравнивает раннеавестийские тексты с позднеавестийскими текстами. Анализируются религиозные взгляды в раннеавестийских (гатических) текстах, показывая, как монотеистический принцип, присутствующий в этих текстах, со временем трансформировался в политеистические элементы, которые встречаются в позднеавестийских текстах. Подчеркивается усиление политеистических элементов. Несмотря на то, что Ахура Мазда изображен как центральное божество, рассматривается влияние митраизма, поклонение отдельным атрибутам и другие формы верований на зороастризм. Кроме того, внимание уделяется социальным, политическим и культурным причинам этого процесса. Статья способствует лучшему пониманию исторического развития Авесты.

Ключевые слова: Зороастр, зороастризм, Мазда Ясна, гаты, эманация, атрибут, манихейство, христианство, веды.

INTRODUCTION

Although Zoroastrianism initially promoted monotheistic beliefs in its early times, the *Avesta* texts reveal the presence of polytheistic elements and their interaction over time. The main focus of this research is to identify the reasons for the transition from monotheism to polytheism in the *Avesta*, how this process developed from a theological perspective, and the impact of these changes on the development of religious views. By addressing these issues, the article contributes to understanding the significant transformations within the religious system of Zoroastrianism. Furthermore, analyzing the connections between the concepts of monotheism and polytheism, and exploring the historical, cultural, and social factors behind these processes, is of crucial importance.

LITERARY ANALYSIS AND METHOD)

The literature dedicated to the study of the *Avesta* has primarily developed along two main lines: historical-archaeological and linguistic-textual approaches. The works of Biruni on Zoroastrianism and the *Avesta*, his accounts of versions of the *Avesta* texts written on cattle hides, and his information regarding the destruction of temples and religious texts by Alexander have been studied. Scholars such as Boyce (1984) and Is'hoqov (2022) play a central role in analyzing the semantic and linguistic foundations of the *Avesta*. Additionally, researchers like Kreyenbroek (2022) and Skjaervø (2011) are significant in analyzing the differences between the Old and Young *Avesta* languages.

Methodologically, the article employs both linguistic analysis and religious-interpretive methods. Based on early literature, such as the works of Biruni and Boyce, historical-methodological approaches have been used to study the historical and spiritual context of the *Avesta* texts. This approach helps to gain a deeper understanding of the processes of the composition of *Avesta* texts, their revision, and the introduction of new deities.

Linguistic analysis mainly focuses on identifying the differences between the Old and Young dialects of the *Avesta* language and highlighting their interrelations.

Additionally, conceptual analysis plays an important role in the research, as it identifies theological differences in the *Avesta*, particularly the interaction between monotheistic ideas and polytheistic concepts. The analysis of ideas by Is'hoqov (2022) serves as a crucial source for understanding the historical changes in Zoroastrianism and sheds light on the religious and political interpretation processes of the *Avesta* texts.

DISCUSSION

Avesta is the general name for the collection of sources that form the foundation of the Zoroastrian religion. Each book in the Avesta is called a *nask*. According to Biruni, the Avesta originally consisted of 30 *nasks*. After Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire (Achaemenid Empire), he ordered the destruction of all Zoroastrian temples in the region and the burning of the copies of the Avesta. [Biruni, 2020, p. 224] Biruni also provides information that the last Achaemenid ruler, Darius III (c. 380-330 BCE), had a copy of the Avesta written in gold letters on 12,000 ox hides stored in his treasury. [Biruni, 2020, p. 224]

The origin of the term “*Avesta*” remains a subject of debate, and its etymological meaning is also unclear. This word first appears in Pahlavi texts in the form of “*abestāg*”. Scholars have interpreted this term in various ways. Most interpretations trace back to Christian Batholomae’s work, suggesting that it derives from the reconstructed **upa-stavaka*, meaning “praise-song”. However, based on the results of our research, it is possible that this word is related to the Middle Iranian word *pwst’k(a)* (*pustak*), meaning “book” or “document”. This word is primarily characteristic of Eastern Iranian languages, and it is derived from *pwst* (*pōst*), meaning “skin, hide”. This word later underwent derivational changes, and in Parthian, it appeared as *pwstag* (*pōstag*) with the meaning of “parchment, book” [Boyce WL, p.75]; in Sogdian, it appeared as *pwstk*, *pwst’k* (*pūstak*, *pūstāk*), meaning “book, letter, document, parchment” [Gharib, p.331]; and in Bactrian, it appears as *πωσταγο* (*pustag*), meaning “book, document, contract” [N.S.Williams, p.258]. There is even a view that the Sanskrit word *pustaka*, meaning “book”, may have been borrowed from Eastern Iranian languages [Sa’dullayev, 2021, p.911]. This process also indicates that the main material used for writing in ancient and medieval Iranian-speaking peoples was animal skin. From this perspective, the word *Avesta* may be a form of the word *pwstg* or *pwst’k* that has undergone inflection.

The language in which the Avesta is written is conventionally called the Avestan language by scholars. The Avestan language has dialects that can be differentiated into Old and Young Avestan based on linguistic, literary, and conceptual features, with Old Avestan predating Young Avestan by several centuries [Hintze, 2015, p.38]. In the Yasna *nask* of the Avesta, there are 17 *gāthās*, and the language in which they are expressed differs from the language used in the other parts of the Avesta. In Avestan studies, these *gāthās* are also referred to as “Songs of Zarathushtra” as it is known that all of them were spoken by Zoroaster. The word *gātha* in Avestan means “song” or “recitation”, and it still exists in modern Indo-Aryan languages in the form of *gīt* (meaning “song”). In the Uzbek and Tajik national song and music systems,

such as the *shashmaqom*, terms like “dugoh”, “segoh” and “chorgoh” are used in a similar musical context, and the Orientalist scholar Mirsodiq Is’hoqov has translated the term *gātha* into Uzbek as *goh* [Is’hoqov, 2022, p.12].

The language of the *gāthās* – the Old Avestan language – according to the Orientalist O. Skjaervø, may have formed at the end of the 2nd millennium BCE. The Young Avestan language, on the other hand, probably emerged during the period when Zoroastrianism became the religion of the Achaemenid kings [Skjaervø, 2011, p.59]. The linguistic characteristics of Old and Young Avestan indicate that they formed long before the transition of Iranian languages to the Middle Iranian stage [Kreynbroek, 2022, p.202].

An important aspect is that there are theologically significant differences between the *gāthās* and the other texts of the Avesto. In the *gāthās*, the concept of monotheism predominantly leads the narrative. For example, in the 28th chapter (the *Haitiy*) of the Yasna, in the first *gāthā* of the "Ahunavad *gāthā*" (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th stanzas), Zoroaster presents Ahura Mazda as the object of worship, expresses faith in His unparalleled power and strength, and attests to His omnipresence in witnessing all actions.

In the 4th *gāthā* (Yasna, 31), Zoroaster speaks of Ahura Mazda’s eternal and infinite nature, stating that He is the creator, judge, and savior of existence. It is also emphasized that He is the essence of human life and the father of Good Thought (Vohu Mana):

"Ah, Mazda! From the depths of my heart I call You, You are the beginning,

You are also the end, the true essence of life. You are the father of Good Thought (Vahu Mana), the judge of True Existence (Haurvatat),

I feel this in my heart – You are the savior of the world!" (Yasna, 31.8)
(Translation by M. Is’hoqov)

It is known that, Zoroaster condemned the sun worship, which later developed into Mithraism, and called for monotheism. This is clearly evident in the 10th stanza of the 5th *gāthā* (Yasna, 32.10). In this *gāthā*, Zoroaster speaks about the religious situation of his time and place, mentioning how the priests were encouraging people to worship the sun and cattle cults, leading them away from the path of Truth.

In the 6th *gāthā* (Yasna, 33), concepts such as **Ispandarmat** (Spenta Armaiti) – **Perfect Wisdom**, **Asha** (Arta) – **Truth**, **Shahriyor** (Hshatra Varya) – **Just Power**, and **Bahman** (Vohu Mana) – **Good Thought** are mentioned, and they manifest as attributes of the “activity” of Ahura Mazda in the form of angelic figures. Additionally, in the *gāthās*, Ahura Mazda's attributes beyond these, such as **Hurdod** (Haurvatat) – **Unique and Eternal Existence** and **Murdod** (Ameretat) – **Eternal**

Life, are also mentioned. Based on his research on the gāthās, M. Is'hoqov concluded that because of their existence, Ahura Mazda encompasses all areas and spheres of the world of goodness, repels all the evils, and in other words, they are emanations of Ahura Mazda [Is'hoqov, 2022, p.126].

In chapters 43 and 44 of the Yasna Nask, Zoroaster mentions the reward promised by Ahura Mazda after death for righteous deeds and refers to Behišt (Paradise). These chapters emphasize two significant theological concepts: Behišt (Vahišta Ahu) and the Chinvat Bridge (Cinvāt peruta). Behišt is described as the eternal abode for those who have remained steadfast on the path of Truth (Asha), where there is no suffering, hardship, or sorrow. Chinvat is the bridge that leads to Behišt after death.

In chapter 46, verse 10 of the Yasna Nask, it is emphasized that whether a man or a woman follows the path of righteousness with devotion to Ahura Mazda and embraces faith, the Chinvat Bridge will be wide for them (making their passage easy). Zoroaster affirms this by stating, "I will accompany them," assuring his support for the righteous.

During the Parthian Empire, some parts of the Avesta began to be compiled, and during the golden era of the Sassanid rule, between the 3rd and 6th centuries, the Avesta texts were restored. Theologically, these restored texts contain conflicting ideas. This is especially evident in the dualistic concepts found in the Old and Young Avesta texts. Many scholars emphasize that Zoroastrianism was founded on dualism from beginning to end. This dualism represents the continuous struggle between good and evil.

In the texts, Ahura Mazda is repeatedly emphasized as the creator of existence, with the idea that all things in the world and in thought are directly created by Him being central. Therefore, the creation of both Good and Evil can be understood as a destiny granted by Ahura Mazda to test humanity and its faith. In other words, the Great Creator creates both good and evil concepts and "rewards" people according to their free choices. This idea is reflected not only in Mazda Yasna (early Zoroastrianism) but also in other world religions.

In the sections of the Avesta, other than the Gāthās (i.e., in the texts of the younger Avestan language), the eternal struggle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman is depicted. This reflects a scenario where the existence and thought are balanced by two equally powerful theological entities striving for dominance. Therefore, it contradicts the concept of monotheism presented in the Gāthās, which challenges the Zoroastrian monotheistic belief. In the theology of Zoroastrianism, the highest rank is based on these two poles, logically necessitating the existence of a supreme deity

who created these poles. When the Avesta was revived, an attempt was made to address this issue. As a result, it was concluded by the Mobeds (Zoroastrian priests) that both Ahura Mazda and Ahriman originated from Zurvan, the divinity of time, which is the most stable concept of existence in Zoroastrian thought. This theory is based on the mythology of the ancient Greek Olympian gods. In this mythology, the three main pillars of existence—Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades—defeat the time deity, Chronos, and achieve dominion over Olympus.

The parts of the Avesta that were restored strengthened polytheism within Zoroastrianism. The Amesha Spentas (according to the Gāthās, the emanations of Ahura Mazda) were elevated to the status of independent deities, becoming distinct objects of worship. In addition to these, other deities that were considered marginal in Zoroastrianism, such as Mitra, Anahita, Apam Napat, Tishtrya, and Ardvi Sura, who were originally gods of the ancient Aryans (the Indo-Iranian tribes), also became independent and nearly equated with Ahura Mazda in the texts of the Younger Avesta, particularly in the Yashts, which have reached us in the 22 chapters. In short, the Yashts represent a period when primitive mythological religious concepts and cults were reintroduced into the Zoroastrian tradition after Zoroaster [Is'hoqov, 2022, p. 10].

According to the Avesta scholar and Sogdianist Mirsodiq Is'hoqov, in order to reconcile the situation, which contradicted the idea of monotheism, it was proposed that these gods and deities were also created by Ahura Mazda. By asserting the claim of monotheism, they attempted to present polytheism as being under "divine consent," leading to a theo-deistic solution.

There is an underlying aspect to this event, which is that the idea of the singularity of the divine in Zoroastrianism was crudely disrupted by the association of various deities with the supreme deity [Is'hoqov, 2022, p. 10-11].

So, what necessity led to the emergence of polytheistic traditions in Zoroastrianism, which is based on monotheism?

To answer this question, we first look to the Avesta itself, particularly the Gāthās. In certain Gāthās, especially in the 46th chapter of the Yasna, real-life events are described, including the sufferings Zoroaster faced while promoting and spreading the Mazda Yasna faith. The text also describes how his family members, relatives, and tribespeople turned away from him. This struggle highlights the challenges Zoroaster encountered in his mission. Because of this, the Orientalist I.M. Steblin-Kamensky referred to this Gātha as the "Hymn of Rejection" [Steblyin-Kamensky, 2009, p. 156].

It becomes evident that the society in which Zoroaster lived tried to remain firmly rooted in their traditional polytheistic religions, resisting the acceptance of the monotheistic Mazda Yasna faith that Zoroaster advocated. Therefore, Zoroaster sought out sympathetic figures among the ruling elites of this society.

Polytheistic elements within Zoroastrianism were likely reinforced with the rise of the Sassanian Empire. During this period, particularly in Bactria, the growth of the Mithra cult is observed. Mithra's image frequently appears on coins minted by the Kushano-Sassanian rulers, indicating that Mithra had become the patron deity of the Kushano-Sassanian rulers [Dani, 1996, p. 109].

The Orientalist Ghirshman connects the development of polytheistic Zoroastrianism with the concept of the “imperial religion”. According to him, the necessity for an “imperial religion” arose during the reign of the Sassanian king Shapur I. Ghirshman argues that Shapur I “had to mobilize all national resources to fight against Rome” [Ghrishman, 1954, p. 309], and he sought to strengthen his authority and the societal structure of his empire with a “national religion”. For this reason, his “favorable attitude toward the ideology of Mani was not without purpose” [Ghrishman, 1954, p. 310]. It is likely that Mani's promotion of a universal ideology was also a “commission” of the elite of Persia at that time. He had based his ideology on Babylonian and Persian cults, as well as Buddhism and Christianity.

According to Ghrishman, in the East, Buddhism had reached its peak of development and was spreading widely by the time of the Kushan period. In the West, Christian communities and churches were emerging even in Northern Mesopotamia, while Judaism was becoming significantly more active in the Babylonian region. This created a situation in Persia where Zoroastrianism, “pressed in” by these other faiths, found it necessary to solidify its position by any means and to confront its new rival—the teachings of Mani. As a result, there was an urgent need to strengthen Zoroastrianism with a more powerful source [Ghrishman, 1954, p.310]. This led to the task of quickly compiling and consolidating the Avestan texts that had been passed down orally, with the goal of distributing them as a unified source across all Zoroastrian communities.

As a result, the Avesta was “revived” as a universal and national religious source for the Iranian peoples. Through the Avesta, Zoroastrianism solidified its teachings and managed to expel Manichaeism from Persian lands, while preventing Christianity from spreading in the region around the Euphrates River and Buddhism from entering the Helmand basin [Dani, 1996, b.109].

Regarding the clash between Zoroastrianism and Islam, M.Is’hoqov presents the following conclusion:

“The stability of the concept of Allah’s singularity in Islam, in contrast, caused Zoroastrianism’s concept of a single god to blend with dualistic views and a form of polytheism involving numerous gods and deities. This blend left Zoroastrianism vulnerable in historical processes, making it unable to withstand Islam and ensuring the dominance of the Islamic faith” [Is’hoqov, 2022, p. 10-11].

RESULTS

The article discusses how Zoroastrianism shifted from a monotheistic foundation to a polytheistic direction, as reflected in the Avestan texts and their historical processes. Initially, the Avesto served as a religious source expressing Zoroaster’s concept of a single god – Ahura Mazda, but later, due to political and religious reasons, polytheistic elements were incorporated into the text through revisions and the addition of new *nasks*.

The transition from monotheism to polytheism in the Avesto, especially after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire and the policy of Alexander the Great to destroy temples and religious texts, accelerated. This process strengthened during the Sassanid period, particularly in the regions of Bactria and Parthia, helping establish Zoroastrianism as the national religion of the empire. Additionally, the dualistic ideas and polytheistic concepts in the Avestan texts emerged as part of Zoroastrianism’s attempt to compete with other religious movements.

The shift to polytheism in Zoroastrianism is especially evident in the Yashts and the new Avestan texts, where deities like Mithra, Anahita, and other gods are depicted as independent objects of worship. This situation reflects the development of religious theology in Zoroastrianism and the complex theodeistic views that emerged during the period of Avestan revival.

CONCLUSION

The transition from monotheism to polytheism in Zoroastrianism appeared as a complex process due to religious traditions, socio-political circumstances, and interactions with other cultures. The revival of the Avesto and the inclusion of new *nasks* contributed to defining the theological balance of Zoroastrianism and led to the popularization of polytheism. During the promotion of the worship of Zoroaster’s single god, Ahura Mazda, the tendency within society to preserve polytheism played a crucial role.

During the Sassanid Empire, the revision of Avestan texts and the addition of new deities helped Zoroastrianism respond to practical religious needs and reinforce its ideology. At the same time, the changes in the theological views within the Avestan texts manifested Zoroastrianism as an important tool in its struggle with other religions and philosophical doctrines.

In the confrontation between Zoroastrianism and Islam, the historical changes in the theology of this religion and the manifestation of polytheism in contrast to monotheism became an essential factor in ensuring the dominance of Islam.

In short, the development of Zoroastrianism and its acceptance of various forms of polytheism occurred against the complex backdrop of the religious, political, and social context of the time.

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